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Local News

SHA juggles keeping COVID-19 out of longterm care and letting families come closer

The Saskatchewan Health Authority will allow "outdoor visitations" under specific circumstances.

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Jack and Bev Shiffman celebrate their 68th wedding anniversary while seated six feet apart at Sherbrooke Community Centre. PHOTO BY MATT SMITH /Saskatoon StarPhoenix

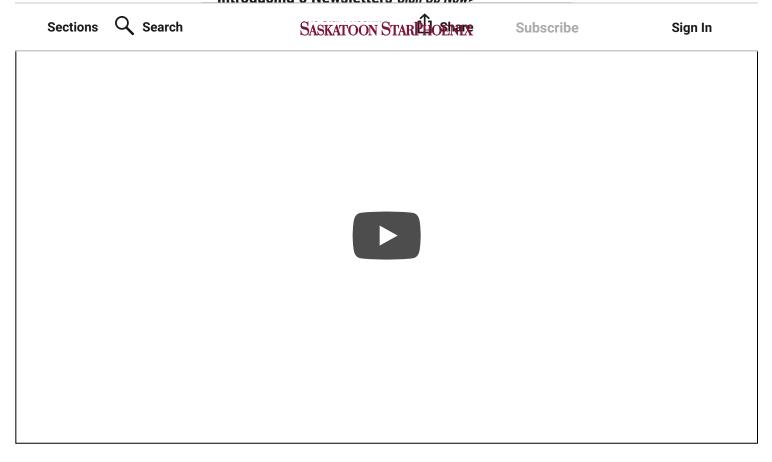
It's been months since Andy Kotelmach has seen his wife of 37 years in person.

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In mid-March, he was suddenly separated from her when the Saskatchewan Health Authority restricted visits to long-term care homes to limit the spread of COVID-19.

"I have been isolated from my only family member that I lived with. I've been denied access to her on the premise that I'm going to give her something," Kotelmach said.

His plight illustrates the challenge Saskatchewan faces as it loosens rules on visitations to long-term care with the goal of keeping the virus out while allowing family caregivers a little bit closer.

On Wednesday the SHA announced it will allow homes to arrange "outdoor visitations" when "the resident's quality of life and/or care needs cannot be met without the assistance of a designated family member or support."

Visitors will still have to undergo screening and are asked to wear a medical-grade mask whenever keeping six feet of distance isn't possible.

Previously, only visits for "compassionate reasons" were allowed, but SHA CEO Scott Livingstone said the authority recognized the need for visits, especially for people like Kotelmach who care for a partner with dementia.

The Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) says 47.9 per cent of 10,127 assessed long-term care residents in the 2018-19 fiscal year had dementia.



SHA CEO Scott Livingstone PHOTO BY BRANDON HARDER /Regina Leader-Post

Livingstone emphasized the SHA usually encourages visits and that these policies "are not our norm but are designed to meet the demand of an unprecedented situation."

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Outbreaks in long-term care homes in other provinces have claimed thousands of lives.

Shan Landry, a former social and health worker, is now involved in a coalition of family members, patients and other caregivers in Saskatoon. She said while Saskatchewan has generally succeeded at keeping COVID-19 out of nursing homes, that's come at a cost for residents' autonomy and mental health.

"While keeping people infection-free is incredibly important, we have removed one of the most important things about quality of life, which is human touch and connection with people they love," she said.

In some instances, people in long-term care may only have a few months left to live, she noted. Data from CIHI indicates that 65 per cent of discharges from long-term care homes in Saskatchewan in the 2018-19 fiscal year occurred because the resident had died in the facility.

Some long-term care homes have already allowed outdoor visitations. On Monday, 90-year-old <u>Dr. Jack Shiffman celebrated his 68th wedding anniversary with his wife, Bev, from the other side of a chainlink fence.</u>

Bev is a resident at Sherbrooke Community Centre, where Jack was a daily visitor prior to the pandemic. He said the separation has been "tough" but he believes outdoor visits at least let him make the best of the situation.

Kotelmach said he will "take what he can get," but he believes he should be allowed to visit his wife as long as he follows infection control measures and takes a COVID-19 test. He lives alone, so he's potentially even less of an infection risk than the staff. He's been frustrated by the health authority's strict rules when he knows his time with his wife is limited, he said.

"As bad as the pandemic days are, those are going to be my wife's best days. And they're just ticking off."

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